

The Countryside Alliance

– Voice of the Rural Dispossessed?!

Why Take Any Notice Of It?

The Countryside Alliance was created in March 1997¹ to oppose an anticipated ban on hunting with dogs under the New Labour government. It should never have been any more than a pro-hunt group of minimal importance to anyone not interested in the debate, but its appearance coincided with an accelerating crisis in farming and rural communities generally, and it has been able to capitalise on this to gain support among a much wider audience than just hunting enthusiasts. Repeatedly, strategies to disguise the core interests of the Alliance have been put into place, with the result that they have gradually become more and more acceptable to the media and the public, and have begun to be taken quite seriously by many as an authoritative voice on rural issues, even those with which they have little connection, for example social exclusion. These strategies have included:

- a gradual change of board members and key figures to move the peers and large landowners to more behind-the-scenes roles,
- the appointment of some non-hunting officers to give the impression of being a broad-based movement with all rural issues at its heart,
- infiltration of organizations such as the National Trust and RSPCA, in order to make hunting acceptable among more people, but also to narrow the gap between the Alliance's own position and the position taken by organizations which are deemed by large numbers of the public to be respectable and moderate.

In spite of this, the Countryside Alliance is making some noise about what is undoubtedly a very serious problem – the decay of rural communities – and some appear to be of the opinion that in the absence of large-scale alternatives, they should merely be steered more in this direction instead of being opposed altogether. However, the Countryside Alliance cannot be part of the solution as it is part of the problem.

The Countryside Alliance should be opposed for several reasons:

- Its **staff** have several **conflicts of interest** (see below) including links with corporations involved in accelerating rural decay.
- Obviously, **it supports hunting** and other cruel sports.
- It claims to care about all aspects of rural life, yet its structure, origins, membership and staff suggest otherwise: **It remains an organization to defend field sports.** (See below)
- It claims to speak for 'the countryside'. In fact, **it speaks for the leisure interests of the landed gentry and assorted business people.**
- **Its proclamations about how hard times are for rural people are fairly shameless** considering the role that landowners and business people have played in making sure that times stay as hard as possible for the peasantry.
- Its **funding and investments** show a high degree of **hypocrisy** (see below)

What Is The Countryside Alliance, Exactly?

The Countryside Alliance is, formally, an amalgamation of three groups: the **British Field Sports Society**, the **Countryside Movement** and the **Countryside Business Group**, but it is the name "British Field Sports Society Investments Ltd." which appears in the annual accounts, alongside "Countryside Alliance"², suggesting that the amalgamation may not have taken place on very equal terms..

Indeed, the Countryside Movement and Countryside Business Group appear only to have been formed to support field sports. According to a briefing prepared for the CPHA, the Countryside Business Group was at first called the Country Sports Business Group, but changed its name after only a few weeks³. It was founded by American-born corporate lawyer **Eric Bettelheim** with the aim of raising funds to protect field sports.

Bettelheim is qualified to practice law in both the UK and the USA, and is a consultant for **Mishcon de Reya**, where his Countryside Alliance chum **John Jackson** is also employed. According to Bettelheim's potted biography on the Mishcon De Reya website, he specialises in the regulation of financial institutions, derivatives, managed funds, cross-border transactions, commercial disputes arbitration, venture and development capital. He is a frequent speaker at industry conferences and he is the author of over 40 publications and principal editor of three texts dealing with swaps, futures and commodity products, none of which seems to suggest that he has the concerns of the rural poor at heart⁴. His approach to fundraising seems to have been quite unsuccessful: The Countryside Business Group aimed to persuade businesses which would be threatened by the demise of bloodsports to donate a percentage of their annual turnover to the cause of defending them, as well as imposing a voluntary national game levy, for example £1 per salmon or 27 p per driven bird kept⁵. The CBG fell well short of its fundraising targets, however. Perhaps the irony of some of Britain's richest people trying to solicit protection money from small businesses and individuals was not lost on those who did not pay up.

The Countryside Movement was founded in November 1995, supposedly as a group to campaign on rural issues other than bloodsports. Sir, now **Lord, David Steel** was its first chairman, and received £93 752 for his efforts⁶. His position on hunting was mixed:

"If I were confronted with an opinion poll and asked to tick a box to approve or disapprove hunting, I would have to say that I disapprove, but that is not the point. The point is whether I use my vote in the House of Commons to ban an activity in which I personally do not wish to take part when others might use their votes to ban activities in which I do wish to take part."⁷

Angling, for example⁸.

Other leading lights in the Countryside Movement were more directly in favour of hunting. At the first two inaugural meetings, those present included **Max Hastings**, editor of the London Evening Standard (a keen shooter and angler, and Vice President of the Game Conservancy Trust)⁹, **Earl Peel**, Chairman of the Game Conservancy Trust; the **Duke of Westminster**, then President of the Game Conservancy Trust and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation; and **Hugh Van Cutsem**, shoot owner and head of the Countryside Business Group (CBG). The Countryside Movement's Board of Directors also included **Robin Hanbury-Tenison** OBE, then Chief Executive of the British Field Sports Society and **John Swift**, then Chief Executive of the British Association of Shooting and Conservation¹⁰.

The most obvious influence of the BFSS and the Countryside Business Group on the Movement came from funding. Any pretence that the Countryside Movement was a separate body totally disappears with the revelation that the CBG provided £550 000 towards the set-up and development of the organisation and that the BFSS provided £250 000¹¹. In addition, the Movement's main activity, other than advertising itself, seems to have been collecting people's names and addresses for its database. This was done in a fairly underhand manner, with National Farmers' Union members' addresses being passed on without their knowledge or consent. Not only that, but the Countryside Movement had registered the BFSS as a recipient of its database, even though many were no doubt against hunting and had joined up because of concern at the state of the countryside in general¹².

Looking at these groups, one can see the pattern emerging which continues today in the Countryside Alliance. Early on, it was realised that there was a lot of mileage to be gained from taking advantage of the very real problems of rural areas to get widespread support, yet the high concentration of bloodsports enthusiasts within the upper echelons of the organizations meant that issues other than bloodsports would always be sidelined.

The Countryside Alliance has made quite serious attempts to present itself as an organization which is much wider than bloodsports, but a look at its structure reminds us that the changes have been largely cosmetic. Its departments are as follows:

	Telephone
PR	020 7840 9220
Membership	01672 519490
Political	020 7840 9260
Policy	020 7840 9250
Campaign for Hunting	020 7840 9210
Foresight: Campaign for Shooting	020 7840 9235
Campaign for Falconry	020 7840 9200
Gone fishing: Countryside Alliance initiative for Angling	020 7840 9274
Country Sports & Political Hotline	07774 236101
Honest Food: Campaign for Independent Food	020 7840 9219

<http://www.countryside-alliance.org/membership/contact.htm>

The arrangement of this table is quite telling - PR, then bloodsports, then a rather feeble and belated food campaign. Its departmental contact details betray a distinct bias towards bloodsports, with the campaigns apparently not devoted to bloodsports being vague and undefined. There is not even any section of the website (www.countryside-alliance.org) devoted to the Honest Food campaign.

Where?

The Countryside Alliance's address is:
The Old Town Hall,
367 Kennington Road,
London. SE11 4PT.

tel - 020 7840 9200
fax - 020 7793 8484
e-mail - info@countryside-alliance.org

Since May, what was the events office has been made into the Commercial Directorate, which is based in Marlborough, Wilts, and is headed by Roger Loodmer.

Who?

The current **Board of Directors** consists of:

John Jackson - Chairman
Bill Andrewes - Deputy Chairman
Richard Burge - Chief Executive
Lord Mancroft
Maurice Askew
Prof. Caroline Tisdall
Robert Waley-Cohen
Charles Wilson
David Reynolds
Bob James
Mark Firth
Sam Butler¹³

Given that at least nine of these twelve people are involved in bloodsports, we should not give too much credence to the Countryside Alliance's pretensions of being a broad-based organization concentrating on a wide range of rural issues. None of these people have expertise in eg. food policy or social exclusion, and some are actively involved in perpetuating rural poverty, for example by selling overpriced homes to commuters.

John Jackson

This ridiculously busy man cannot possibly have enough brain-space left to think coherently about the countryside: He is Non-Solicitor Chairman of law firm Mishcon de Reya, Chairman of Ladbroke Group, and Celltech plc.; A Director of Billiton plc, Wyndeham Press Group plc., WPP Group plc., Xenova Group plc., Brown and Jackson plc., and Oxford Technology Venture Capital Trust; Special

Advisor to the Korda Seed Capital Fund and Cambridge Animation Systems Ltd.; and one of the four owners of History Today¹⁴. His original involvement with the Countryside Alliance was through the Countryside Business Group¹⁵.

Bill Andrewes

Definitely a hunting enthusiast, Bill Andrewes was with the BFSS, before becoming Chairman of the Campaign for Hunting. Having been elected Vice-Chair of the CA Board, he relinquished his other position¹⁶.

Richard Burge

A zoologist and former Director General of the Zoological society of London, colonel's son Richard Burge is also Member of the Labour Party. He is a trustee for the Television Trust For The Environment and of the Charles Darwin Centre. He also sits on the council of the Shropshire and West Midlands Agricultural Society¹⁷. His appointment as Chief Executive is said to have caused consternation in some quarters, particularly after an interview in the Spectator, in which he said that he would take a job from anybody, had never hunted, and that the Countryside Alliance would survive without hunting¹⁸.

Lord Mancroft

Tory peer Lord Mancroft was Deputy Chairman of the BFSS¹⁹, and is chairman of Inter Lotto UK Ltd²⁰.

Maurice Askew

Maurice Askew has been associated with the Union of Country Sports Workers and is or has been Master of the Barlow Hunt in Derbyshire²¹. He is quoted as threatening that "We are fighting for liberty and freedom. My warning for Mr Blair is that if he does not listen to us there will be a civil war in this country, the like we have never seen since the days of Cromwell and Fairfax."²²

Prof. Caroline Tisdall

Formerly a Guardian journalist, Caroline Tisdall is now Professor of the Department of Rural Future at Oxford Brookes University. She shoots, angles, stalks, hawks and "would die in a ditch to defend hunting."²³

Robert Waley-Cohen

Owner of a healthcare company, Robert Waley-Cohen has been a steward for The Jockey Club, (also associated with the Jockey Club are fellow CA board member **Charles Wilson**, **Christopher Sporborg**, a Countryside Alliance director, and the **Duke of Roxburghe**²⁴ and **Lord Vestey**²⁵, donors to the CA) is a racehorse owner and is organiser of Upton House Horse Trials²⁶. He was an executive of Christies Auctioneers (UK and US) from 1969-1981, and in 1983 founded Alliance Imaging Inc., the largest out-sourced radiology department in the US, followed by Alliance Medical Ltd., the largest out-sourced radiology department in Europe. He is also a trustee of the Countryside Foundation for Education, a member of the National Trust, and the Country Landowners Association (due to being a partner in a farm on land surrounding Upton House in Warwickshire²⁷.)

Charles Wilson

Charles Wilson is a former Managing Editor of **Mirror Group** Plc; former Editor of **The Times**, a Trustee World Wide Fund for Nature UK and a member of the Jockey Club²⁸.

David Reynolds

Master of the Woodland Pytchley Hunt, David Reynolds is so keen to defend hunting that according to the East Northants. Anti-Bloodsports, he has tried to ride over saboteurs on a number of occasions²⁹.

Bob James

A well-known angler, Bob James is Chairman of the Countryside Alliance's Gone Fishing Campaign.

Mark Firth

Chair of Foresight, the Countryside Alliance's Campaign for Shooting, Mark Firth is Joint Managing Director of Roxton Bailey Robinson sporting agents. He participates in shooting, fishing, stalking and other country sports in the UK and worldwide³⁰.

Sam Butler

Chairman of the Countryside Alliance's Campaign for Hunting, Master of Warwickshire Hunt and

partner in estate agent Butler-Sherborn, Sam Butler is a particularly badly-placed person to be a leading light on an organization which claims to care about rural communities: His estate agents sells extremely pricey homes to rich folk, with not a hope of the locals being able to afford them. Nick Cohen of the Observer phoned Butler-Sherborne posing as a cash buyer for a remarkably over-priced Cotswold pad. On expressing concern that he could face hostility for being a townie, the saleswoman replied 'Oh no, Everyone round here's a commuter.'³¹

Butler made rather a fool of himself by bellowing without a blush to a demonstration outside the Labour Party Conference: 'Our forefathers didn't fight Hitler to have this lot take away our liberties.' One of Butler's forefathers was 'Rab' Butler, who certainly didn't fight Hitler. He appeased him throughout the Thirties and then aided Lord Halifax's manoeuvres to force Churchill to bring about a negotiated surrender in 1940³².

President

Baroness Anne Mallalieu QC

A Labour peer and great fan of hunting: "Hunting is our music. It is our poetry. It is our art. It is our pleasure. It is where many of our best friendships are made. It is our community. It is our whole way of life."³³

Deputy President

Lord Marcus Kimball

Educated at Eton and Cambridge, Lord Kimball has been Director of the Royal Trust Bank, External Member of the Council of Lloyds, and Tory MP for Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. He has been Huntmaster of the Fitzwilliam Hounds and Cottesmore Hounds, and frequents Whites and Pratt's gentlemen's clubs³⁴.

Commercial Directors

Christopher Sporborg

A banker who lives on a farm in Hertfordshire³⁵. One wonders what happened to the farmer...

Michael Hoare

A banker from London³⁶. A real yokel then...

Nick Bannister

A stockbroker from London³⁷. Hmm.

Secretary: Roger Loodmer

An angler from London.

Also of interest is that out of the Countryside Alliance's token five pounds' worth of shares, one is held by **Andrew Salvesen**, who was a Non-executive Director of **Christian Salvesen** plc. between 1989 and the demerger in September 1997, when he was appointed to the Board of **Aggreko plc**. He had more than 20 years' with Christian Salvesen, including being Managing Director of Christian Salvesen's former Oilfield Technology operations. He is a Non-executive Director of **Smedvig ASA** and **Stirling Shipping** Ltd as well as being Chairman of **Robertson Research Holdings Limited**, **Canvas Holidays Limited** and **Roxar ASA**³⁸. Quite what expertise about the countryside this has given him is unclear.

Who Else?

Who funds the Countryside Alliance?

A document leaked to The Observer revealed a number of donors to the Alliance. They include:

Prince Charles, who lent his house for a cocktail party

Sir Hardy Amies, the Queen's dressmaker

Lord Vestey, the meat tycoon and polo playing chum of Charles who is page of honour to the Queen.

Marquess of Hartington, chairman of the British Horseracing Board and the Queen's representative of Ascot.

Sir Christopher Bland, Chair of the BBC

Duke of Northumberland³⁹ - Britain's 87th richest man with £250million, who caused controversy by riding roughshod over local opinion by planning to build executive homes in Chatton on his estate⁴⁰.

The Duke Of Westminster– Britain's richest man, with an estimated fortune of £4 Billion, gets £300 000 in farm subsidies per year for his farm near Chester⁴¹, is a member of the **Country Land and Business Association** (CLA, formerly the Country Landowners' Association), was one of the original board members of the **Countryside Movement**⁴² and has been the President of the Game Conservancy Trust and the **British Association for Shooting and Conservation**. He is reported to have helped out the Countryside Movement with a £ 1 million pound 'loan'.⁴³ He was also on the Countryside Alliance's board until a 1998 re-shuffle in order to make themselves look less like the voice of the landed gentry⁴⁴, and is one of the Countryside Alliance's main funders, though **rumours that he is the 'anonymous benefactor' who provided its offices are apparently unfounded**, having been denied by a source within the Alliance who states that the office was given by someone who lives in Switzerland⁴⁵.

Sir Robert McAlpine, construction company

Sunley Holdings, construction company

Persimmon Homes⁴⁶ home-building company. In a stunning piece of hypocrisy, the Countryside Alliance on one hand expresses concern about the destruction of greenfield land and recognises that disappearance of greenfield and green belt land are major problems⁴⁷, yet on the other hand are funded by those who are responsible for this destruction.

Who Does The Countryside Alliance Support?

Shares:

Yet more double standards are apparent in the CA's investments. It has more than £40 000 worth of shares in Barclays bank, which caused a storm last year by closing 171 rural branches⁴⁸. On one hand the Alliance is campaigning against these moves, whilst on the other, financially supporting them. Likewise, it holds £30 000 worth of investments in **Shell**⁴⁹, whilst backing last years' oil protests and simultaneously claiming to care about the environment, and also holds large investments in super-polluter ICI and ethically-challenged mining company **Rio Tinto**, not to mention arms and tobacco companies⁵⁰.

PR and lobbying company PPS Group Ltd.

The Countryside Alliance's choice of PR and lobbying company is particularly noteworthy. **Political Planning Services** Ltd. may not be big, but it carries disproportionate weight, consisting of individuals who have worked closely with politicians in the past. Again, a great conflict of interest is present in the Countryside Alliance's support for this company, since it specializes in trying to get through controversial planning applications. Its newly-revamped web page boasts: "PPS is proud to have worked with the biggest names in the property sector. Whether it's a residential development on a Green Belt site or a mixed use scheme in a city centre, PPS works with the planning consultant and the rest of the team to get approval."⁵¹

Past clients include **McDonalds**, **Morrisons**, **Tesco** and **Sainsbury's**, not noted for their ecological thinking, nor for their equitable treatment of farmers, nor for their contribution to healthy local economies⁵². Through its support of PPS, the Countryside Alliance supports abuse of the planning system, whereby those who have money pay for lobbyists to get them round the planning laws, and cover the countryside with community-killing sprawl, whilst those who do not have difficulty getting permission to build themselves a single home and also bear the brunt of increased traffic, community decay and increasingly mind-numbing jobs. Likewise, being a specialist in controversial planning applications, PPS has over 20 home-building, construction and quarrying companies on its client list⁵³, and the Countryside Alliance supports this through it at the same time as expressing concern about the destruction of the countryside. Lastly, concerning PPS, it is worth noting that **Mark Pendlington**, former managing director at PPS Group, is now Chief Executive of the **Country Land and Business Association** (CLA), bringing out yet more cosy links between landowners, big business and manipulation of government⁵⁴.

The Future

It almost certainly won't be long before the Countryside Alliance is exhorting the rural oppressed to march again in London, and our challenge is to make sure that people know it is an organization for the defence of bloodsports, not an organization which can address the wider problems of diminishing incomes for rural people, not an organization which will stop the countryside being covered in concrete and pollutants, and not an organization which will devote any significant resources to improving the quality of our food. On one hand the Countryside Alliance says it cares about social exclusion, on the other hand, its staff consists of bankers and landlords who specialise in the

unequal distribution of wealth, and its shareholdings perpetuate this. On one hand it says it is concerned with the fate of the whole countryside, on the other hand it devotes scarcely any resources to non-bloodsports issues. On one hand, it expresses concern about the environment, on the other hand its staff and donors are busily covering the land in overpriced housing and its shareholdings and PR company are facilitating this. People who care about the countryside must show the Countryside Alliance up for the fraud that it is, and must break its virtual monopoly as the 'voice of the countryside'.

Footnotes

- [1] It was not formally set up until the following year, but the groups initially came together under this title to organise the July 1997 Countryside Rally.
- [2] Countryside Alliance, Annual Report and Accounts 2000, p. 19-24
- [3] Stewart, Ben, (Campaign for the Protection of Hunted Animals), The Countryside Alliance – a Briefing, unpublished.
- [4] http://www.mishcon.co.uk/fir/fir_d/fir_d_peop/fir_d_peop30.htm , last viewed 22nd June 2001
- [5] Stewart, Ben, op cit.
- [6] Select Committee on Standards and Privileges Twelfth Report, Annex A, (Letter to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards from Mr Dale Campbell-Savours MP), HMSO, 10 February 1998, including excerpt from Countryside Movement Annual Report and Accounts for the year ending 31st March 1997.
- [7] House of Commons Hansard Debates for 3rd March 1995, www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199495/cmhansrd/1995-03-03/Debate-3.html , last viewed on 25th June 2001.
- [8] *ibid*
- [9] Pan-MacMillan Online, <http://www.panmacmillan.com/AV/MaxHastings.htm>
- [10] Say, Judy, "So What is The Countryside Movement Up To?" www.oneworld.org/tlio/research/le3say.html, last viewed 25th June 2001, "Rural Lobby Takes Aim At Theme Park Britain", Times, 17th November 1995.
- [11] Stewart, Ben, (Campaign for the Protection of Hunted Animals), The Countryside Alliance – a Briefing, unpublished.
- [12] *Ibid*
- [13] Countryside Alliance, Annual Report and Accounts 2000
- [14] <http://www.mishcon.co.uk/>
- [15] "Guardian of the Land", Horse and Hound, 15th February 2001, p.10
- [16] "Board Changes at Countryside Alliance", Press Release, Countryside Alliance, 7th July 1998.
- [17] Who's Who 2000, A and C Black, London, 2000, p.291
- [18] "Gone to Claridge's", TheSpectator, 20th January 2001
- [19] "RSPCA Head 'Enlisted Hunters'", Times, Wednesday May 2nd 2001.
- [20] "Next Step Forward For The Countryside Alliance", Press Release, Countryside Alliance, 26th March 1998, <http://www.countryside-alliance.org/news/latest/980326sgm.htm> , last viewed on 28th June 2001
- [21] "Countryside 'army' descend on Labour", This Is London, September 29 1999
- [22] Maurice Askew of the Union of Country Sports Workers at the Welsh Countryside March and Rally. Western Mail, 11 November 1999.
- [23] Caroline Tisdall, potted biography for Countryside Alliance Board elections 2001.
- [24] Prince's Aide Revives Row Over GM Food, The Guardian, 28th September 1999.
- [25] Prince named as secret backer of hunt lobby, The Guardian, 26th September 1999.
- [26] British Endurance-Riding Association, Latest News March 2000, http://www.british-endurance.org.uk/ghr_pressnews.html , last viewed 9th July 2001
- [27] <http://www.countrysidefoundation.org.uk/WhatisCFE/Trustees/RW-Cmain.htm>
- [28] "Next Step Forward For The Countryside Alliance", Press Release, Countryside Alliance, 26th March 1998, <http://www.countryside-alliance.org/news/latest/980326sgm.htm> , last viewed on 28th June 2001
- [29] East Northamptonshire Anti-Bloodsports News, 2nd December 2000 <http://www.northantshsa.org.uk/news.htm>, last viewed 9th July 2001,
- "Hunt Master hospitalizes Saboteur", Kettering Hunt Saboteurs news release 11th February 1995
- [30] "New Chairman For Campaign For Shooting and Alliance Shooting Committee", Press Release, Countryside Alliance, 21st June 1999
- [31] "Is it Hair or Blague?", The Observer, 31st December 2000
- [32] Unholy Alliance, The Observer, 15th October 2000
- [33] Baroness Mallalieu's speech at the Hyde Park Rally, later repeated in her submission to the Hunting Inquiry <http://www.huntinginquiry.gov.uk/evidence/baronessmallalieu.htm>
- [34] Who's Who 2000, A and C Black, London, p.1139
- [35] Countryside Alliance Annual Return 2000
- [36] *ibid*.
- [37] *ibid*.
- [38] <http://production.investis.com/aggreko/board/> last viewed 9th July 2001
- [39] "Prince Named As Secret Backer Of Hunt Lobby", The Observer, 26th September 1999
- [40] "Tenants Revolt Over Duke's Homes Plan", Daily Express, 10th February 2000.
- [41] "Revealed: How Britain's Richest Man Takes A £3m Tax Hand-Out, The Observer, 20th May 2001
- [42] "Rural Lobby Takes Aim At Theme Park Britain", The Times, 17th November 1995
- [43] "Back In The Hunt", The Guardian, 4th October 2000.
- [44] "Country Alliance Seeks New Image", The Times, 4th April 1998
- [45] Anonymous source, June 2001
- [46] Stewart, Ben, (Campaign for the Protection of Hunted Animals), The Countryside Alliance – a Briefing, unpublished.
- [47] CA Press Release, 13th July 2000, 'Rural Issues Ignored In Government's Annual Report' <http://www.countryside-alliance.org/news/latest00/000713rural.htm>
- [48] "Fury Over Rural Lobby's Shares" The Observer, 29th April 2001
- [49] *Ibid*.
- [50] *Ibid*.
- [51] -www.ppsgroup.co.uk
- [52] The bulk of the client list has been removed from the new website but a printed copy of the old site, also at www.ppsgroup.co.uk, is held by Corporate Watch
- [53] *Ibid*.
- [54] "New Chief Executive Announced For CLA", CLA Press Release, 23rd January 2001 <http://194.200.85.11/sources/27/171/4015965/01009HQ.htm>